KINSHASA'S FLUXES AND RHYTHMS

Words: Filip De Boeck & AbdouMaliq Simone

What does the nebulous idea of living together in a place such as Kinshasa mean? And what is the role of photography in documenting and researching this cohabitation in an urban space characterised by folds, gaps and holes?

Belgian anthropologist Filip De Boeck and Congolese photographer Sammy Baloji are currently working on a book and exhibition project about new urban extensions in Kinshasa. The project is both a narrative of place, the capital of postcolonial Democratic Republic of Congo, and a visual study of things that defy verbal narration: the city's affective landscapes and moods.

AbdouMaliq Simone: You and artist Sammy Baloji have been collaborating for the past several years, considering changes in how cities and territories are imagined by different kinds of people. You have explored different facets of how massive appropriations of land in the Katanga region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for various global extraction commodity circuits gave rise to the idea that a major metropolitan area could be constructed from scratch, and the subsequent wheeling and dealing in land rights that accompanied this. You have explored how old infrastructures in Kinshasa are organised into new neighbourhoods and how various new built environments—some the work of major developers and government, and some others the work of individual or popular initiatives—create new forms of urban imagination and modernity. The two of you are accomplished professionals in your respective fields of urbanism and photography. What does your collaboration create in terms of different ways of knowing the urban? What does it enable us to know, for example, about Kinshasa, that might not be possible otherwise?

Filip De Boeck: Let's start with photography—and why Sammy and I work together. I can't speak for Sammy and what motivated him, of course, but I think that what we had in common from the start was a shared fascination for 'the mirror', the spectacle of money, its impact on the (specular) development of cities in Congo, on the one hand. But there is also the way in which people, on the level of the everyday, move beyond their own fascination for this mirror and the different kinds of—colonial and postcolonial—modernities that it reflects in order to construct more tangible and liveable, inhabitable urban lives and futures for themselves.

Working with photographers has been my modus operandi for a long time now. Personally, I like these collaborations for various reasons. I find it hard to conceive of an ethnography of "cityness', of a truly urban anthropology, without photography. The "modern" city is a visual thing, of course. In a way the city only exists through the photographic image, just like photography developed in and through the city. The images we have of Paris have been shaped and fashioned by Brassai's photographs, for example, and the New York of our mind's eye would not exist without Walker Evans. In the same way Jean Depara's—or more recently Kiripi Katembo Siku's—photographs of

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Leopoldville/Kinshasa have become the collective image of Kinshasa. How do we use photography in relation to Kinshasa? Photography does many things. First of all, it is often said that photographs objectify, that they render static, that they freeze. But they can also do the opposite: they make the city a particular kind of living subject. Rather, a good photographer is capable of capturing the city’s affective landscape, its moods, the ways it touches its inhabitants, which is something completely different from a verbal narration, what people themselves say about their city, or what I as an anthropologist can narratively capture from the city. In this way, photography helps me to bring in and understand–and render–the feel of the city. It helps me to bridge the gap between theory and the lived experience of the city, and construct an analysis or a narrative of urban life in alternative ways.

This is something that has to do with different compositional possibilities. A straightforward linear narrative of the city is impossible, or at least it is not what Sammy or I are after, but at the same time, a narrative is always implied in what one writes or photographs, films. And inevitably, there is this tension between the simultaneous time in which the city happens and unfolds, and the successive time that a narrative implies. Photography/video helps us to bridge this: it helps us to make chronology subordinate to the analytic/narrative demands of the sequence. And that does not only apply to what I write but also to the visual narrative itself. Sammy started out as a maker of comic strips, a genre in which visual chronology plays, of course, a very important role. And reflecting upon this question of chronology/sequence is something that connects the two of us in what we try to make and say. It is often said that photography carries within it the possibility for a negation of chronology. Photography has the capacity to impose a visual narrative that invents its own sequences. It has, for example, the capacity to represent simultaneity through working with paradox and random juxtapositions. In that sense, it is extremely well suited to cover an urban landscape, such as Kinshasa in which juxtaposition and paradox are omnipresent. And employing these visualising strategies enables the emergence of a different kind of narrative, away from more standardised and more strictly linear records that, in fact, do not fit this kind of city at all. Instead we try to generate a narration of the city as a set of interdependencies between figures, places, colours, shades, sounds, moods and affects. In that sense I have learnt a lot from the photographer.

AMS: You have already completed one major exhibition and book project on Kinshasa with photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart. Is there something different that you are now reaching for in your work with Sammy? Have you discovered other things that are possible to do with photography since that earlier project?

FDB: Photography does many things. First of all, it is something on the surface, it is horizontal, and therefore it is well suited to capture the fluid geography of a city such as Kinshasa that constantly negates and transcends matters of the map and attempts at more formal planning. On the other hand, photography is also vertical. Photos grant access to an inside, an interior, or as Walter Benjamin put it, if I remember correctly, to an “optical unconscious”. That is why the night is so prominently present in the work of many photographers that try to capture urban reality. Photos have a potential to reveal the inside of darkness, and to make it visible, to make the content of the shadow visible, to “illuminate the shadow”, as artist William Kentridge would say. That idea is what shaped my previous collaboration with photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart, a

collaboration that resulted in an exhibition and a book, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (2004). That book, in many ways, was a vertical examination of the city as a space of the occult, the invisible forces that drive the city forward beyond the hardware of its architecture and infrastructure. It was about the city as it exists as a mental space, as a state of mind, as a specific form originating from autochthonous and more global imaginations. It was a book that intended to make darkness—the hidden—visible.

The book that Sammy and I are currently working on proceeds from the opposite direction: it is a much more horizontal book, a book about the surface or the plane of the city, not beyond but in the various material appearances of the city, its current infrastructures and architectures, in the various forms of dilapidation or emergence in which they find themselves. On a first level, it is a book about how such spaces animate life in the city and are animated by it. That does not mean that we do not have an eye for the vertical, for example, in terms of the temporal layers, the historical palimpsests that have contributed to the making of the contemporary surface of the city. Quite the contrary, we are very aware of those dimensions.

Sammy is a photographer par excellence who has been very attentive to these layers in all of his photographic and artistic work. His art is basically about how different times convert into the space of the now. The photo-collages for which he is rightly famous render well this presence of various pasts, as they try to unravel the palimpsest of the city through a photographic work on memory, history and nostalgia. In this sense, I see his work as a collecting and recollecting of urban pasts in the present, and the possible futures one can inhabit from that point on.

AMS: But what is it about a city—here Kinshasa—that makes it "available" to this kind of investigation. In terms of common sense, the city is talked about as a place of inhabitation, a place where people live, attempt to chart out a life. Thus, the city is something that needs to be stabilised, read and experienced in predictable ways. There seems something about the city that refuses inhabitation, that makes all possibilities of inhabitation at least partially uninhabitable, as there is something about the city that eludes any attempt to tie it down, to make it act in any predictable way? Sometimes it seems as if the city is a black hole that makes any clear assessment of it simply disappear in the force of its gravity.

FDB: Our horizontal exploration of the city's scape is basically an investigation into the qualities of the 'hole'. In a way, Sammy has always been a photographer of postcolonial holes, as his photographs of mining sites or of post-industrial landscapes in Katanga illustrate so well. And I have had a longstanding interest in all kinds of holes, ranging from mining sites to graves to potholes as the city's generic infrastructural form. One could say that, today, the notion of the hole (*libulu* in Lingala) not only captures the essence of the city but has become a kind of meta-concept that people use to reflect upon both the material degradation of the city's colonial modernist infrastructure and to rework the closures and often dismal quality of the social life that has followed the material ruination of the colonial city.

What Sammy and I are investigating is basically the question of how this 'reworking' takes place, how this postcolonial hole is filled in the experience of Congolese urban residents. What possible answers does Kinshasa come up with in response to the challenge posed by the hole? If the city has transformed into a hole, how can this hole be 'illuminated' to become the something else that enables living, and *living together* in the city? Here I take the notion of living together (in French *vivre ensemble*) that can only exist where the whole, the assemblage is not fully formed and is not yet closed. For, *living together* always implies a contestation about how a social body, a collective, completes itself—it is a process that is never completely closed, summed up or fully identical with itself.

AMS: So what does it mean to "live together" in a city like Kinshasa today? As family, kinship and neighbourhood solidarities are often stretched to the limit, and residents search sometimes desperately for a viable experience of being together, what new forms are emerging, and how does your work with Sammy understand these new forms?

FDB: That, I think, is basically what preoccupies both Sammy and I: to understand the nature of what a nebulous notion such as *living together* in a place such as Kinshasa might mean. We try to investigate the closures and openings through which this *living together* in the city is made possible or is rendered impossible; to discover where and how people stitch their lacks and losses together and 'suture' the folds, gaps and holes of the city. Sutures here suggest the possibility of closing wounds, generating realignments and opening up alternatives, thereby also pointing to new kinds of creativity with (spatial and temporal) beginnings, and new forms of interactivity and *living together*.

We investigate these gaps and sutures by proceeding by means of a number of urban acupunctures, in other words, investigations of specific sites within (and often beyond) the city of Kinshasa—a particular building, field, graveyard, mountain, pothole, a new city extension and so on—into which we stick our analytical needle in order to understand what happens in all of these places that form important, though sometimes materially barely

visible nodes within the city. These are sites where the city switches on and off, where quickenings and thickenings of goods, people and publics are generated and the various lines and connections between them become visible.

Let me say a little more about this notion of urban acupuncture. Both architect Bärbel Müller and dancer and choreographer Ariel Osterweis Scott have used the notion of urban acupuncture to describe the dance performances of Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula, with whom Sammy collaborated in the past (see Sammy's 2007 video-film *Mémoire*). Scott analyses Linyekula's dance as a form of "geo-choreography", an embodied practice that demands a continual reordering of the spaces of the urban landscape without colonising them. Scott claims that Linyekula's artistic interventions establish a network of corporeal and architectural sites, such as his Kisangani-based Studios Kabako, within that landscape in an endeavour to "connect the dots", to use the artist's own words, and thereby re-contextualise and "heal" or "appease" the body of the city, with its multiple spaces and forms of cultural production. Similarly, for Müller, the small-scale spatial, temporal and programmatic interventions that are initiated by Studios Kabako have the capacity to activate "waypoints" or "acupuncture points" within urban space, thereby negotiating and transforming the urban tissue both in terms of space and time, as well as through operations that are relational as well as reactive, and create new "networks of characteristic energy levels with catalytic effects on the urban fabric".

AMS: So more than simply an investigation that produces particular kinds of knowledge about the city, you see, in this notion of "urban acupuncture" a way of actually operating on the city, of doing something concretely to it?
FDB: The notion of urban acupuncture itself originated in the "weak architecture" movement associated with Catalan architect Ignasi de Solà Morales, who first coined the term, and was further developed as a concept by architectural environmental theorist and urban planner Marco Casagrande. Building on his involvement with an illegal urban farming settlement in Treasure Hill in Taipei, Casagrande conceptualised urban acupuncture as a strategy for micro-urbanistic interventions in weak and vulnerable parts of cities. In line with a longstanding tradition, he sees cities as living, breathing organisms, where the architect or planner manipulates what Casagrande refers to as "the collective sensuous intellect" of the urban body. The architect sticks his needles in the city's neural tracts and pathways in carefully chosen local urban nuclei, nodes and pinpoint areas that are damaged, endangered or in need of repair. As with acupuncture and other forms of bioenergy that act upon the nerve tracts in our bodies, this intervention is aimed at activating and healing problematic parts of the urban body in an attempt to revitalise the urban corpus as a whole. These interventions are often minimal. As stated on the Casagrande laboratory

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website: "A weed will root into the smallest crack in the asphalt and eventually "break the city". Urban acupuncture is the weed and the acupuncture point is the crack." Neither Sammy nor I share any of the therapeutic, healing or appeasing intentions and aspirations of Linyekula's geo-choreographies or Casagrande's urban acupunctures, but I find their respectful and delicate approach to the city theoretically enriching and methodologically helpful. Focusing on the city's less visible layers, cracks and folds rather than on its planned and rational surface, both Linyekula and Casagrande are attentive to the city as lived environment. They tap into its fluxes and rhythms and are open to the streams of energy pumping through the arteries of the city, to the affective, tactile and haptic dimensions of this urban body and the action potential of its neural system. They privilege the human scale of the incorporated over the distant scale of the master plan, improvisation over colonisation, interstitial connectivity over fragmentation, and continuity over radical break (even though, as I noted before, that continuity between past and present never actually materializes as a linear narrative). And this is precisely the scale that we are interested in, not so much to "break the city", or change, heal or intervene in it, but rather to 'break open' the city, to make it visible and reveal it, to connect the dots between the different sites that constitute it and activate the desire lines that run through it.

These urban acupunctures lay bare the horizontal and synchronic lines that spatially connect the various sites of the city and sometimes branch out far beyond its actual geographical limits to include other urban (and rural) sites within Congo and beyond. These acupunctures also work vertically, combining space and time. They are archaeological acts of diachronic test drillings, as they bore into the various historical sedimentations that have made the city into what it is today. These layers have not crystallised or fossilised into the solidity of dead matter. They form the organic material, the humus that feeds the living organism of the city. They are the compost in which various pre-colonial and colonial pasts decompose and are recycled to fertilize the present with new, hybrid, and palimpsestual meanings that often pervert older contents, but also provide a certain continuity (albeit shaky and not always recognizable or illuminating). Urban acupuncture, therefore, can never become an autopsy. Instead, it enables us to encounter and describe emerging urban assemblages as living bodies in alternative and novel ways. The registers of textual analysis and photographic reflection that we generate thus act as forms of trailblazing—or ways of marking—that contribute to a better understanding of the often elusive manner in which people in this kind of city context manage. Not only to survive individually but also to transcend that basic level of bare life, and build a more inhabitable and inclusive urban world where the possibilities of collective action and dreams of a shared future continue to be explored ■

VESTIGES AND AMBITIONS

For over a decade **Sammy Baloji** (b. 1978, Lubumbashi) has been photographing the urban forms and cultural artefacts that elaborate the Democratic Republic of the Congo. His strategies for imaging this mineral-rich, war-racked country of 68 million people, Africa's third largest, are diverse. He has redeployed archival photographs from Belgian-colonial rule, collaging them onto contemporary landscape scenes from Katanga province. The selection here, however, is documentary. There is a view of the vertiginous and work-in-progress concrete tower built by a Kinshasa medical doctor who specialises in "aeronautic and spatial medicine". Baloji, who exhibited work at this year's Venice Biennale, has also taken aerial views of Lubumbashi and Kinshasa. Baloji and collaborator Filip De Boeck have written that the latter shows a pockmarked city "littered with colonialism's broken infrastructural dreams".

01. New construction on the Avenue des Huileries

02. In 2003, a medical doctor specializing in “aeronautic and spatial medicine” bought a small plot of 13m² in the municipality of Limete. Assisted by two architects, he set out to build a four-storey building. He later fired the architects and from there, without a clear plan, he became his own architect. His project, pictured here in 2015, is ongoing

03. Remainder of pedestrian bridge along the Boulevard Lumumba, Kinshasa

04. Colloquially known as "the building" (le Bâtiment), the Office Congolais des Postes et. Télécommunications (OCPT) is a former radio-communications building in Kinshasa. The L-shaped modernist structure was constructed in the mid-1950s and is located in Sans Fil ("wireless"), a neighbourhood of the populous municipality of Masina. The building is presently squatted by some 300 people, mostly unpaid government employees of the Ministry of Telecommunications